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SUICIDE

Suicide is extremely rare among the Tanala and none of my informants could recall any instances. They said that it would normally be due to insanity and would, therefore, debar the individual from burial in the gens tomb. In some of the other Madagascar tribes suicide was resorted to in extreme cases as a means of revenge upon a powerful enemy, the suicide devoting his soul to injuring his antagonist. My Tanala informants said that such a thing would be possible, but knew of no cases. They said that the Tanala were a gentle and kindly people and that any difficulty would be adjusted before it came to such a point. Suicide because of disappointments in love struck them as ludicrous and they were much amused to learn that it occurred in European countries. 762

ATTITUDE TOWARD DEATH

The Tanala do not fear death from ordinary causes. Their belief in the existence of a soul, and in its persistence, is absolute. They are schooled in this from infancy and nearly all of them feel that it has been verified by personal experiences. Practically all my pagan informants claimed to have met one or more of their ancestral spirits either in dreams or when in lonely places. 761

They believe that the soul's transition from life to death is an easy one, involving no great change. The future life is a simple projection of their present condition and the changes, if any, will be for the better. They have no fear of future punishments, for the only one included in their theology is that of disownment by the ancestors, which is only enforced in extreme cases. Ordinarily, the whole group of ancestors will be waiting to welcome them and show them their place in the spirit village. Death does not even interpose any great barrier between the individual and his living friends and relatives. He can return at will to supervise their affairs and has much more power for good or evil than when alive. With this in mind, they face death calmly and old people, especially those who are poor or neglected, often seem to look forward to the change, feeling that it will improve their condition.

When a man thinks that death is approaching, his main concern is not for the welfare of his soul but for the proper division of his property and the impressive celebration of his funeral. If he has time, he will assemble his relatives and friends and give away most of his possessions. This is important, for it is impossible to make a will under native law, estates being divided by fixed rules. Usually 763 431

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763 these gifts will be delayed as long as possible, for they are uncondi-
[431] tional and if the man should recover he could not reclaim them. He will give directions as to his funeral, discuss the erection of his memorial stone, declare that a certain piece of land will belong to his spirit and must not be cultivated without a sacrifice to it, indicate what sacrifices he prefers, and in general set his affairs in order for this world and the next. His audience listens with great respect and these last wishes will be fulfilled whenever possible, for failure to do so would earn the enmity of his ghost.

761 The feeling toward violent death is quite different. This is viewed with terror. It prevents a man from putting his affairs in order and the loss or mutilation of the body entails bad results for the spirit. The owner of a lost body is unable to join the ancestors until it has been recovered and placed in the tomb, or the equivalent ceremonies have been performed. Mutilations are carried over into the spirit world and the condition of the body becomes that of the soul for eternity. Children grow up in the spirit world and the sick are healed, but the old are not rejuvenated nor are lost members restored. Because of this belief, the natives will show cowardice in the face of sudden danger which is in marked contrast to their composure at ordinary death.